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Academic Research In a Small Country: Called to Serve!

HANS BRUYNINCKX
Wageningen University, Netherlands and Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium
(E-mail: hans.bruyninckx@wur.nl)

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Abstract. The literature on the interaction between research communities and policymaking processes comes mostly from scholars in large countries with hundreds if not thousands of people working on international environmental issues. In small countries like Belgium and The Netherlands, however, policy networks of academics and decision makers are quite small. Not only are there opportunities for academic researchers to influence policy decisions - there are high expectations that they do so.

Key words: Belgium, Holland, policy networks

Abbreviations: NGO – nongovernmental organization.

Introduction

The debate on the influence of researchers and academics on environmental policymaking has been mainly held among academics of the Anglo Saxon tradition and usually placed in an American and British context. Some of the theoretical frameworks that try to frame this influence and make analytical or theoretical distinctions are clearly embedded in those policymaking traditions. Examples include epistemic communities theory and various conceptualizations of policy networks theory. In this article I will try to demonstrate the importance of the specific characteristics of both the policy and academic context in mediating the impact of academic research on environmental politics. I will do this based on my own experiences as an academic in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Through my position at the Catholic University of Leuven, I have personally been active in environmental research at the Flemish and the Belgian federal level.[1] The various positions I have held reflect this paper's thesis that policy influence is almost unavoidable in a small country. These positions include President of the Board of the umbrella organization of 140 Flemish environmental NGOs (Bond Beter Leefmilieu); President of the Arbitration Commission for the Funding of Local and Provincial Environmental Policy; Member of the Flemish Council of Nature and Environment; Member of the Advisory Council on Sustainable Development for the

European Structural Funds; Member of the Advisory Council for Sustainable Investment Funds of the KBC (the largest bank in Flanders); and Co-promoter of the governmental Flemish Center for Expertise of Environmental Policy. In the Netherlands my experience is more limited, since I have only worked at the Wageningen University for about three years.

Although significant differences exist between the Dutch and the Belgian environmental policymaking contexts, I am convinced that a number of my observations on the interaction between environmental policy researchers and policymakers are valid in both countries. Moreover, talking over the years to colleagues from other small countries such as Denmark or Finland has convinced me that there are characteristics of academic-policy interactions that are typical for small countries. It is worth discussing these in a more systematic manner because most of the literature on the interaction between research communities and policymaking processes comes from scholars in large countries with hundreds if not thousands of people working on international environmental issues on both sides of the equation. It would seem only logical that in countries where those communities consist of only a couple dozen people, things would operate in different ways.

In the following pages I will first discuss the research environment in the field of international environmental politics. Secondly, I will describe the typical policymaking network in a small country like Belgium. I will then look at the specific expectations vis-à-vis academics in that context. Subsequently a number of incentives for academics to get involved in the policy arena will be discussed. I will finish with a more personal appraisal of some of my own experiences and draw some conclusions.

Academic Research Environments on the Topic of International Environmental Politics

To understand the impact of academics and research on international environmental politics in small countries like Belgium, it is important to understand that this type of research is taking place in a distinct academic environment. The university setting in Belgium (and to a lesser extend in the Netherlands) is different from that of large countries such as the United States, France, Great Britain or Canada. The Flemish community has only four major universities (located in Antwerp, Leuven, Gent and Brussels). Within those universities, at most ten people in Belgium hold full-time academic positions in environmental politics. Of these, there is not a single (!) full-time position in international environmental politics. Indeed, I teach the country's only graduate-level class on this topic. This is an enormous difference from Great Britain or the United States, where hundreds of people are considered specialists in international environmental issues.

Academics in Belgium are well respected and regarded as important figures in political debate and, based on their academic position. Generally speaking, when policy-oriented academics speak, policymakers pay attention. Writing newspaper opinion pieces or voicing opinions on national radio or television is not unusual for

those academics. Reactions to what they have written or said often lead to further debate or to invitations by policymakers (both bureaucratic and political) to further discuss issues. In that sense, Belgian academics are public or political figures and part of the science-policy interface by default.

Policy Networks in Small Countries

The policy network on environmental issues in Flanders is comparatively quite small. In addition to the limited number of academics and other researchers mentioned above, a small group of people in strategic policy positions in the bureaucracy are involved in most important decisions. The group focusing on international aspects is even smaller – a dozen people are responsible for follow up on all international environmental agreements and negotiations. Those representing employers, environmental and other stakeholders in the policy debate likewise number no more than 20 to 30 people across all topics of environmental policymaking. There is little opportunity for specialization given the broad scope of issues these players must address.

According to the literature (Huyse 1987, 1997; Hendrikse 2002), policy networks comprised of such small numbers are typically characterized by short lines of communication, informality, and interpersonal relations based on personal trust. We find all of these characteristics at the Flemish level. It is common for high level bureaucrats and politicians to maintain close personal or professional contact with academics working in the field. In my experience, this has led to instances where the chief of the minister's cabinet will call a professor late at night for some input on a policy speech for the next day. Or another example, a top official representing Belgium at EU negotiations will request a couple of pages on a specific topic and adopt this as the Belgian point of view. At professional gatherings concerning policy evaluation, nearly everyone knows each other. There is no 'hiding' possible for policy-oriented researchers in this context.

Trust is important in this small community for several reasons. The same group of people will be actors in this field for a long period of time, and across different domestic and international issue areas. As a result one must establish a reputation for trustworthiness and reasonable argumentation. Consensus is highly valued, and reputations can be easily ruined. This type of interaction renders researchers and policymakers "colleagues" in the same policy field. Academics working on policy relevant issues are to a certain extent considered part of the policymaking community.

Academics and Their Public Role

Since almost all education is publicly funded in Belgium, academics are in a sense public employees, albeit in a special position. One of the expectations associated with this position is public service. Academics are considered to be in privileged positions,

having high social standing, good salaries, and a mandate to study and write about socially relevant themes. Beyond teaching and research, it is expected that they can be called upon to participate in policy relevant activities. This appears to be true for almost all fields of study in the social sciences: law professors, sociologists, criminologists, communication scientists, political scientists, and others are at various times and at various levels expected to provide input for policymaking processes. This can be at various levels of engagement, but often includes membership in policy advisory bodies or ad hoc commissions; giving explicit policy advice on policy initiatives; policy evaluation or preparation; membership in ministerial cabinets; participation in public hearings in the parliament, ... all the way up to authoring (often behind the scenes) new legislative initiatives.

Indeed, it is almost impossible as a scientist in a field with immediate policy relevance to not be involved in one of those activities. Most often, researchers are contacted and asked by government officials to participate in these activities. These types of activities take up a substantial part of one's academic schedule. Given the context, however, this is considered to be a normal activity and is valued in the university setting – although the expectation to publish in international refereed journals, as opposed to Dutch language publications, is becoming increasingly stringent and hence conflicts with this type of policy engagement.

This situation is rather different from, for example, the United States. Of the hundreds of American university professors who are teaching and doing research on international environmental issues, the overwhelming majority are not directly part of the Washington DC policy network on international environmental issues. In contrast to Belgium, one can choose to be in a strictly academic position. In a large country, it can be more difficult to get involved in the policymaking network than to stay out. For a professor located in Nebraska, it is far from evident how to actively participate in international negotiations or formulate policy texts. That is the exact opposite of the Belgian situation.

Incentives for Policy Engagement

Research funding for environmental policy issues (grants, government contracts, fellowships, etc) is scarce in Belgium, and is even more so for international topics. Those vying for these funds are very limited in number and the 'referees' in the process of distributing research funds know the actors in the network and vice-versa. They are the same small group of people described above. This means that even at the stage of the funding, the dynamics are very different from those in larger countries. When writing policy research proposals, it is normal for research teams to know in advance which other team will submit a proposal or whom to team up with – not necessarily because of methodological or other research-related reasons, but to have all the bases in the informal network covered.

In the distribution of research funds, it is common to require a research team to participate in the ensuing policy debates and processes. In fact, most research in the field holds requirements to be explicitly policy relevant, within the confines of immediate policy dossiers. Those who refrain from engaging in policy debates will quickly discover that this leads to a drying up of their funding sources. This requirement can be interpreted as a financial incentive, but is also an informal part of the deal: if one wants to work in the field of policy research, one will have to participate in the political debate. For more theoretical research, funding is limited and the interest of the funding parties low.

Other incentives that are more purely research-oriented have to do with access to information, both about substantive policy issues and about the policy processes. Engaged and reliable researchers build up networks for information sharing that can be extremely helpful for their research and policy activities in the future. Perhaps even more important is the insight one gains into the policymaking process itself. The ''black box'' of policymaking is less of an unknown after several years in a position that affords at least a peek inside the process, or even direct participation from the inside. A personal experience along these lines was a research project on the institutionalization of sustainable development in the Flemish administration. The process started in the international environmental policy department of the administration, yet involved many other agencies. As an expert responsible for the content of the policy, it soon became clear that one of the major issues was the difference among agencies and the different political orientations of ministers. I had the opportunity to observe turf battles and interagency dynamics from the inside. The opportunity to gain such insights provides a clear incentive for an academic to participate in policymaking.

Consequences of The Special Relationship Between Academics and Policymakers in Small Countries

Those involved in environmental policy research in Belgium probably have much more influence on policymaking processes than the average academic in larger countries. Examples from personal experience include co-authoring several pieces of legislation; significant influence on the distribution of funds for environmental policymaking; helping design the institutional foundation for a Flemish sustainable development policy; and participating in international negotiation teams. An academic can have a tangible and lasting impact on numerous policy decisions if one so chooses. This impact should not, however, be exaggerated. One has influence as allowed by the political actors in the process. Sometimes the possibilities to weigh in on policy processes is large, sometimes it is insignificant.

There are also a number of dangers associated with this type of academic-policy interactions. One of the problems can be summarized with the aphorism, ''*In the land of the blind, the one eyed is king*.'' The small group of environmental policy

researchers is asked to be involved on many different topics. We cannot be experts on all of those topics, and it is fair to say that on some issues Belgium does not have any real specialists. Policymakers turn to academics who may lack expertise on certain topics but whose pronouncements nonetheless enjoy legitimacy due to their social position. Needless to say, this sometimes leads to uninformed, generalist, and for all practical purposes worthless input. Examples include a number of international regimes to which Belgium is a party, but which hold little or no significance for the country. The desert convention is an example. There is not a single national specialist in this policy field, yet annual reports must be submitted, meetings prepared, and so forth. I have personally done some research and published on this convention, but to say that this compares to the expertise available in countries with devoted research groups would be a gross overstatement. Yet, I am consulted on this policy matter as an academic expert, playing the role of the "one-eyed."

This leads to a more general danger, or at least a warning. Researchers have to be very conscious about the limits of their knowledge. It is a good thing to know when to keep quiet and admit ignorance or incomplete knowledge on a topic. There is a fine, but important line between inserting into policymaking one's personal opinions on topics of international relations, versus bringing real research-based knowledge into a process. A good example in my own experience is the global warming issue. I have a basic knowledge of the international regime and its mechanisms, the international debates and the Belgian policy. But at the level of complex technical discussions on Kyoto Mechanisms, or the fine lines of implementation, I have to admit that I am not knowledgeable enough to make any serious research based claims. I wrote an opinion piece in the national newspaper and consequently was invited to have a television debate in 2003 with the minister, the president of the largest party, and the head of the chemical industry in Belgium. This debate has been fruitful and interesting, contributing to further policy initiatives, but demonstrates a general point: In the setting of a small country, experts are often asked to contribute to debates beyond the bounds of their more general policy expertise.

The other danger facing the policy-oriented academic is the potential to lose certain desirable characteristics associated with academia. These include neutrality, a distance from the idiosyncrasies of policy processes, and rigorous research. It is a balancing act that requires serious consideration. The policymaking community does not always recognize this, and once you are involved in policymaking networks, participants tend to forget that we work in an academic environment (if for nothing else for our paycheck!) and being evaluated on academic criteria that increasingly do not take policy engagements into account.

Conclusions

I have tried to illustrate that the role of academics and researchers in small countries differs from the situation in large countries such as the United States and United

Kingdom. Engagement in policy debates is far less of a personal choice. Academics are called to serve, as we are in a sense public employees. It is rarely an option to stick to strictly theoretical academic work if one is active in the social sciences.

This means that academics are part of policy networks, albeit in a special position. Their social status is based on the knowledge claims they bring to the process. Yet, in small countries there are far fewer qualified specialists, and so more general policy-relevant knowledge is brought to the table. This means that academics ought to have the courage to admit that they don't have the background or the research experience on certain issues. That is not always easy, as one is regarded by policymakers as an important and neutral player.

The advantages of the position we have as academics in smaller policy settings is that we do have an impact (although limited by the political context) and we do have inside knowledge of policy processes, unlike many of our colleagues in larger countries. That is a pleasant and professionally fulfilling role.

Note

1. Environmental policy is the exclusive competency of the three regions in Belgium: Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. This means that although it is the Belgian federal government that participates in international negotiations, signs and ratifies agreements and can be held responsible under compliance mechanisms, the regions are internally responsible for implementing international environmental regimes. A good example of this is the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol. Belgium's commitment of 7.5% reduction had to be spread out internally over the three regions. Given the difficulty of the issue and the fact that many other internal policy dossiers are intertwined, it took several years before a final agreement was reached on the different burdens on each region.

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